

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: AMR.01/001/2003 (Public)
News Service No: 52
7 March 2003

The Americas: Violence against women is a human rights issue A declaration by Amnesty International on International Women's Day

On International Women*s Day, Amnesty International wishes to highlight the link between economic globalisation and violence against women. In the Americas region, violence against women occurs in all contexts - internal conflict, militarization, internal migration, in both private life and in the community.

In the work environment, the increased poverty and marginalisation caused by the strong impact of globalisation on the poorest sectors has had serious consequences for the physical integrity of women.

To illustrate this, Amnesty International has begun an investigation into violence against women within the community in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, and the working conditions of women employed in the Central American cross-border assembly plants (*maquilas*). In both cases, the common denominator is a violation of the fundamental rights of women as recognised in international human rights instruments.

Amnesty International recently became aware of three new abductions and the discovery of the bodies of three young women and a six-year-old girl in Ciudad Juárez, all bearing the clear marks of torture and sexual violence.

Esmeralda Juárez, reported missing since 8 January 2003, was found dead on 17 February together with the bodies of Violeta Mabel Alvidrez, 18, and Juana Sandoval Reyna, 17, missing since 4 February 2003 and 23 September 2002 respectively.

As with other cases over the last ten years, the victims* bodies were discovered on the same area of open land, Cerro Cristo Negro, where at least twenty bodies bearing similar signs have also been found, lying between piles of rubbish, half naked, with their hands tied behind their backs. Forensic reports on these new victims indicate that they were raped and tortured before being murdered.

Although the organisation has received a report from the authorities stating that prevention and training policies, along with policies to combat impunity, are being implemented, these crimes join the more than 200 murders reported since 1993.

Many of these women had migrated for economic reasons from other areas of Mexico; they lived in marginalised communities and were employed in the cross-border assembly plants located along the US border. These foreign companies exploit cheap labour and enjoy favourable customs conditions.

Amnesty International is extremely concerned by the fact that this kind of violence is taking place within a context of economic deregulation and liberalisation, in which the intense changes within society are not mitigated by social policies and economic players operate without any control or monitoring.

Amnesty International considers that numerous irregularities have led to impunity in the Ciudad Juárez cases, enabling the perpetrators to avoid legal action and creating a vacuum which, with the passing of years, has had fatal consequences for the women of Ciudad Juárez because the conditions for committing further crimes have not been eradicated.

For Amnesty International, it is essential that Recommendation 44/98 of the National Human Rights Commission (*Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos*) is fulfilled, which calls for investigations into the public officials responsible for the inquiries and who committed culpable omission (*omisión culposa*) and negligence by failing to adequately investigate the murders of women in Ciudad Juárez.

Amnesty International is seriously concerned by the harassment suffered by those who have filed complaints, lawyers, witnesses and defenders of women's rights. A climate of unacceptable lack of protection has been created, and the Mexican State is answerable to the international community in this respect.

The organisation is also alarmed by complaints of torture during legal investigations and evidence of irregularities during criminal proceedings, as well as the killing of a lawyer, the relative of a lawyer, and the death of one of those accused of several of the crimes during the course of investigations, without events having been clarified or those responsible brought before the courts.

Violence against women is a form of discrimination, and includes violation of the rights to life, to physical integrity, to freedom, to safety and legal protection, all enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the UN Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). These international norms reaffirm the State's obligation to clarify the truth, ensure justice and provide reparation to the victims.

As a result of the efforts of the women's movement in the region, the American continent is unique in having a binding treaty to combat violence against women - the Inter-American Convention to Prevent, Punish and Eradicate Violence against Women. The Inter-American system was also pioneering in its reaffirmation, more than 20 years ago, of the State's international responsibility when it fails to investigate or punish with due diligence human rights violations committed by individuals, thus establishing a doctrine of particular relevance to women facing systematic violence within the family and the community.

In the context of the recent hearings of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in Washington, the Special Rapporteur on Women's Rights criticised the lack of action in investigating and preventing the crimes in Ciudad Juárez and urged the Mexican authorities to act immediately.

At the same time, Amnesty International calls upon the continent's governments to take all measures necessary to ensure that the legal protection enshrined in the Inter-American system is made a reality and that it results in greater security for the women and children of the continent.

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

For latest human rights news view <http://news.amnesty.org>